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AN
EXAMINATION
OF
EVENTS,
TERMED MIRACULOUS,
AS REPORTED IN
LETTERS FROM ITALY.

BY THE REV. JOSEPH BERINGTON.

OXFORD :

PRINTED BY W. DAWSON AND CO.

SOLD BY J. COOKE, OXFORD;

AND E. HOOKER, NEW BOND STREET,
LONDON.

MDCCXCVI.



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AN EXAMINATION, &c.

SIR;

YOU will not have forgotten a conversation, which passed between us, at the close of the Summer, on the subject of some extraordinary Events, stated by the public papers and some private letters, to have happened in Italy. Your observations, which were rather severe, I recollect well. Italy, you said, and of Italy the papal states, were as yet the soil in which such phænomena were permitted to vegetate. Where the preservation of power, you added, rests so much on opinion, that opinion, when a concurrence of causes seems to threaten its overthrow, must be strengthened, or its decline will be rapid, and the power it supported will be involved in the fall:—That, in all countries, a change in the minds of men was visible, to obstruct the effects of which, various means either had been or would be devised, as their rulers were actuated by wisdom, intimidated by alarms, or emboldened by a presuming confidence:—That the priesthood, in these circumstances, would naturally have recourse to the means, most congenial with their general habits; and that, as in the history of the progress of their ministry through many ages, it was plain,

they had encouraged a belief in prodigies, whereby Heaven was understood to announce its acceptance of their offices, was it too severe, you asked, to suppose that they would again recur to the same means, should occasions prove favourable, that is, should the minds of the multitude become susceptible of the strong impressions of enthusiasm? On this you concluded, that the prodigies, reported to have happened in some cities of Italy, had either originated with the priests, who were directed by the ruling magistrates, to mislead the people, or that availing themselves of the credulity of some weak minds, the priests had favoured the first impressions of enthusiasm, and set fire to a train of which the explosion, in the contagious susceptibility of the human mind, could not be calculated. The progress of the French arms, you said, and the dismay that accompanied that progress, heightened by a thousand tales of devastation, bloodshed, and horror, would supply all the materials, that could be previously deemed necessary for the working of the scene.

My reply to your observations I shall not repeat, which chiefly consisted in the remark, that though they might contain some general truths, they were not warranted by the imperfect documents as yet received from Italy; that it might be, the whole was a groundless rumour; at all events, that we must wait, till further accounts should enable a prudent man to judge.

These accounts are now before the public, in a pamphlet entitled, *Miraculous Events, established by authentic Letters from Italy*, most of which are given as a translation * from a French copy, published by the same bookseller. But so extraordinary are the contents of these letters, at least must appear so extraordinary to the inhabitants of this country, where the energy of miraculous powers has long ceased to be a subject of popular belief, that, whilst I pity the superstition and blind credulity in which the descendants of the once masters of the world are held enthralled, I am amazed that men can *here* be found, who will give their belief to such unworthy tales, or, what is more, will abet their circulation. To check the current of this stream, which, I flatter myself, is but shallow, the remarks I intended for your private consideration I will lay before the public.

What were the motives of the Editors of these letters, (for I understand they are more than one) even on the supposition that their contents were true, will not easily be conjectured. For so ludicrous are the facts therein related, so unworthy of the great Author of Nature, by whose immediate interference miraculous events are conducted, so easily explained on the common principles of human ope-

Imprudence
of the Edi-
tors of the
Letters.

* This translation is so miserably defective, as grossly to err in the first sentence; and such passages does it omit as to give room for the suspicion, that something worse than ignorance of the French language may be imputed to its authors.

rations, and so tending, as believed to be supernatural, to strengthen superstition and to alienate the mind from just notions of religion and of its duties, that it should seem, he who knew how to value the best interests of his Church, would not have exposed it to ridicule, by a narration, which cannot be read without a smile. At a time, besides, when incredulity is, every where, gaining ground, and when the champions of Christian Faith are sufficiently occupied in defending the citadel itself, and in vindicating from attacks the miracles whereby that citadel was erected, how imprudent is it to accumulate prodigies, and give them as the work of Heaven, unless an occasion, worthy of the divine interference, had presented itself, and it had been evident, above the power of contradiction, that the Deity had spoken. It belongs not to man, I know, to measure the times or the occasions when it shall be proper for the Divine Agency to act; but by referring to the miracles of the gospel and of the apostolic ages, he has a clue given to him whereby to form some judgment, and by that clue, and by the notions which, from the best sources, he has been instructed to entertain of the power and goodness of the Ruler of the Universe, he may, with confidence, pronounce, that nothing obviously mean, undefined in its object, and tending to deteriorate, not to improve, the moral character of the human species, could have introduced a suspension in the established laws of

nature. I will state the events, to which I allude, as they are given in the letters from Italy.

At Ancona, a sea-port town in the papal territories, on Saturday between the 25th and 26th of June last, certain women, alarmed by the report of a conspiracy for the plunder of the town and massacre of its inhabitants, ran in crowds to the cathedral, where was a picture of the Virgin Mary, reported to work miracles, and to which these women, it is said, were particularly devout. While they were here fervently praying before the picture, a little child, whose unusual composure had been remarked, cried out to its mother, "That the Holy Virgin moved her eyes," or, as another account states, "That the Holy Virgin had heard her mother's prayers." Thus was the first impression made. The mother looked, and beheld the prodigy. Others beheld the same; a general cry among the spectators ensued; soon the whole town was in motion; all flocked to the cathedral; and the most incredulous, even the ringleaders of the conspiracy, returned, convinced, from inspection, of the reality of the prodigy. Thirteen days the picture continued to move its eyes, and it was only on the 8th of July, that the door of the church was closed. During that period, the French gentleman who writes the letter, an Emigrant, and formerly a Canon of Lyons, on the 28th, at midnight, was admitted to a near sight of the picture, the motions of the eyes of which he describes minutely.

Substance
of the report
from An-
cona.

They moved first horizontally ; then opened wider than was their ordinary position ; and finally closed. These changes happened twice, during the quarter of an hour he remained before the picture. On the following day, at noon, he returned to the same spot, and beheld the same motion of the eyes, which he is ready to attest on oath.—On the 6th of July, three painters, men of probity, were introduced by authority, when the Vicar General, attended by his officers, directed them to take down the picture, and examine it. This they did ; and as their hands passed over the face, they observed the eyes to open ; and one of them afterwards assured the writer, that what struck him most was, to feel the eyes, as if they had been animated, move under his fingers.

Such is the relation from Ancona ; and on the 10th, other accounts, which confirm the above, state, that the prodigies had not then, or only then, ceased, and that a statue of St. Ann, the mother of our lady, had joined the daughter, and also moved its eyes. This statue, to remove all suspicions of fraud, was examined by the same painters.

And from
Rome and
its neigh-
bourhood.

We come to Rome. About the time that the prodigies at Ancona ceased, a series of the same commenced in the capital. On the 9th of July, as some pious persons were praying before a picture of our lady, called of *Archetto*, it was observed to open and shut its eyes. The report soon spread

through the city, while other persons, equally impressed with devotion, in the same street, before another picture, were heard to exclaim, " Most Holy Virgin, favour us with a miracle." Scarcely were the words uttered, when the eyes moved ; and presently, all the pictures, which are numerous in the streets, exhibited the same phænomenon, moving their eyes in various directions, and almost without interruption. The contagion, within a few days *, reached to the churches, where the same prodigies took place. The streets, meanwhile, incessantly resounded with the cry of *Viva Maria!* and canticles and hymns were sung.—Some similar motions were likewise observed in pictures of our Saviour, and in crucifixes ; and the wonders did not confine themselves within the walls of Rome, but extended to Civita Vecchia, and to other towns in the neighbourhood. Many miraculous cures, it is added, on the blind, the dumb, and the lame, particularly at Perugia, were operated.

A new prodigy now presents itself. Three lilies, by way of decoration, had been placed near to a picture of the Virgin, where they had remained so long, as to be completely withered and dry. But, on the 9th of July, a bud, perfectly fresh and green, was seen on one, and soon three other buds on the others, which promised a speedy expansion,

* The precise time cannot be ascertained, as the first letter (p. 13.) professes to state the events from the 1st to the 16th, whereas, by its own narration, they only began on the 9th of July.

while the stalks remained in their withered state, These, however, grew green; and in this state, for nearly fifteen days, the renovated plants continued, though the heat of the weather was intense, and no rain or vapour fell to refresh them.—At Viterbo, meanwhile, the body of St. *Rose* was covered with an abundant perspiration.—Near Mandola, an illuminated cross, with three lilies, was seen in the air, which moved and rested over the celebrated chapel of Loretto.—At Perugia, three stars of a refulgent brightness appeared on the cheeks of the Virgin, and on the forehead of the infant Jesus, whom she holds in her arms.—In other places, some statues of saints altered their positions.

I have given, I believe, all the prodigies contained in the letters, the principal of which, that is, the opening of the eyes and the budding of the lilies, are attested by men who give their names, and of whose veracity there is not the smallest reason to doubt. Whole cities, they at the same time declare, we, with themselves, witnesses of the facts.

Now, Sir, what shall we say? Shall we insist that so many persons were deceived, that is, did not really see, what their eyes seemed to testify; or that they combined together to lie, and to impose a falsehood on the world? This is not possible; but it is certain they were deceived.

The senses, it will be owned, are the inlets to our knowledge ; and of the senses the sight is peculiarly instructive and comprehensive, conveying to the mind the ideas of light and colours, in all their varieties, and the far different ideas of space, figure, and motion. But as this sense is comprehensive, so is it liable to err, when its organization is imperfect or impaired, when the medium, through which its objects act, is obscured or broken, when those objects are remote, and never more, than when the mind, which ever reacts on its senses, has been so troubled, as to derange the operations of reason, and predispose it to confound the reports of the external sense. The truth of the observation is experienced under all strong impressions, particularly under the alarms of fear and terror, when the common forms of objects are known to change, and the phantoms of the brain acquire apparent extension and solidity. Even when this is not the case, how often is it necessary to call in the aid of the judgment to correct the errors of the eye, or that of some other sense, particularly of the touch. But in cases, where the multitude is concerned, and the passions are strongly excited by a contagious impulse, there is no impression so absurd and abhorrent from common observation, of which the senses (and especially the eye, from its easy irritation) are not susceptible, and ready, with the greatest confidence, to attest. The experience of every reader will call many examples to his mind,

The sight, of
all the senses,
most liable to
be deceived.

Examination
of the pro-
digy of An-
cona.

To the test of these observations, which are founded on the unerring documents of nature, let us bring the inhabitants of Ancona and of Rome. Besides the general consternation, which, from the suspicion of a conspiracy, is said to have seized the people of Ancona, great apprehensions were entertained of the approach of the French armies, (though an armistice, it appears, towards the beginning of the month of June, had been concluded between his Holiness and the Republic) while, at the same time, the mixed sensations of hope and fear, which the rumours of the encreasing strength of the Austrian forces under the new General Wurmser, excited, served still more to perplex the public mind. In this consternation and perplexity were the *women*, when they ran to the cathedral. It is said, they were particularly *devout* to "a miraculous picture" of our lady; and yet these women were sailor's wives, it had been premised, that is, fisherwomen, we may conclude, at no time, a very religious and instructed class of females. Their *devotion*, we may be allowed to think, was a *superstitious veneration*, which is confirmed by what is added, that they first repaired to the Cardinal Bishop to demand the opening of a coffin, which contained the body of a favourite Saint. This was complied with; and in this state of consternation, of hope, of superstition, of enthusiasm, are these sailors wives, and these wives *Italian* women, when we find them on their knees

before the picture of our lady. When we are told, that this picture was *miraculous*, it should have been added, what the miracles were it had wrought, or, in what manner, or by what signs, it had attested its power. Perhaps, it had before been seen to move its eyes, in which case, nothing was so natural as the exclamation of the child. At all events, the picture was deemed *miraculous* by the women, they were *devoted* to it, and consequently were prepared, more in their present agitation than ever, to expect some singular attestation of its favour. A child is heard to cry out: its accents are indistinct, for two very different phrases are imputed to it: the women raise their heads, and see the eyes of the picture move, either because the child, in its infantine imagination, had so announced it, or its sounds, which is more probable, had conveyed that idea to their heated minds, or, from the tales of other pictures or of this, they were prepared to look for the attestation of favour by the motion of the eyes. Where prodigies are so common, as among the superstitious inhabitants of Italy, their exhibition may be attended by a variety of signs. But the gentle motion of the eyes indicated condescension and a benign willingness to grant protection: it told the women, that the Virgin had taken them under her powerful guardianship, that she would shield them from harm, and that their enemies, who were hers, should not prevail against them.

They seized the happy omen, proclaimed it in shouts *, and the neighbouring streets took the contagion.

Can it be thought by the most inexperienced in the operations of man, that these women were in a situation or in a temper of mind, to call in the aid of reason, the cool and critical deliberation of judgment, when their senses first reported to them, that the eyes of their *miraculous* picture moved? Rather, as the appearance accorded with their wishes, they would encourage the illusion, and, by the reaction of their agitated spirits on their own eyes, adding to its vivacity, render the detection of error to them impossible. Let me add, that the medium of sight, that is, the air, was obscure, it being late in the evening; and that obscurity was troubled by the light of wax tapers; and the picture itself, as its position is described, (p. 7.) was placed at some distance *behind* the altar, and consequently was remote from the eye. It was, besides, glazed, and therefore more dazzling.

Let me then infer, that the sailors wives were deceived. Their deception can be accounted for by common experience, founded on the received laws of vision; but on what experience, or on what laws, can we be authorized to pronounce, that the Deity, for no moral purpose that is suggested, at least commensurate with the prodigy, by a miraculous interposition, commanded the eyes

* Les hurlemens se font entendre, p. 4.

of a picture to move, when certain women, in a paroxysm of enthusiasm, fell down before it? Theologians, versed in the rules of criticism, well know, that no effect is to be deemed miraculous, that can be explained by the established laws of nature.

The propagation of the optical illusion to the other inhabitants of Ancona, can create no difficulty. When the first shock had been given, the continuation of the impression followed in a regular series, as the late belief in animal magnetism, and other popular deceptions, could witness. They also, from a concurrence of the general circumstances, were in alarms: when the report of the prodigy in the cathedral was circulated, it was night, and, in the same night, they hurried to behold the picture, where an additional glare of light, an additional confusion, and additional expressions of enthusiasm from every quarter, as they would impede all cool observation, would communicate a sympathetic feeling to every beholder, and fascinate the sight. A philosopher, so circumstanced, would feel his senses bewildered. But on the following, and the succeeding days, when processions, with their imposing pageantry, began, and "the ecclesiastical chapters, religious communities, corporations, confraternities, the nobility, and the magistrates," mixing with the croud, gave their countenance to the popular belief, where can be the surprize, that the deception continued? Num-

bers, on such occasions, instead of facilitating the detection of error, contribute to give it strength. And who will assure me, that those magistrates, with the Cardinal Bishop himself, aware of the confidence, which a firm belief in the miracle, must give to the minds of the people, did not, on a principle of policy, by their agents, and by other means in their power, exert their endeavours to keep alive the enthusiasm of the multitude? If they did so, legislators, and kings, and ministers, and priests, had often done so before them.

The Canon
of Lyons and
the painters
of Ancona.

But will the reasoning which I have applied to the sailors wives and to the multitude, equally apply to the Canon of Lyons, who twice deliberately viewed the picture, and to the painters who critically examined it? — The Canon, let me observe, is a French Emigrant, from the distresses of his situation very liable (I mean not the most distant disrespect) to feed on such gloomy and desponding thoughts, as have a necessary tendency to generate superstition, and incline the mind to believe in prodigies. So, at least, was *he* disposed, as he describes himself. For he relates it as somewhat marvellous, that the street, through which the processions had marched, after fifteen days, continued covered with wax, as if it had just fallen, and that, “on a fine serene day, no flambeau was extinguished.” It is, however, more material to observe, that, before he visited the picture, he “firmly believed in the miracle, on the testimony

of others *." Thus previously disposed, hardly able, from infirmity, "to drag himself along," and, besides, "very short sighted," at midnight, while a glare of lighted tapers filled the atmosphere, he approached, and witnessed the prodigy. It is true, he also made use of his spectacles; but what glasses could rectify a view, which was previously distorted by the conviction, that he should assuredly behold a miracle? Nor does his returning on the next day, at noon, give any credibility to his testimony, since he then took with him a conviction, still more heightened by enthusiasm and the illusions of the preceding night. As to the painters, their report, as far as it can be credited, rests on similar grounds. They were admitted to a nearer inspection; but it was in the presence of the Vicar-General, attended by his officers, when the belief in the miracle had been widely circulated, when they themselves, probably, believed it, and when to have announced to the enthusiastic multitude that they were deceived, and that their "miraculous picture" was an impostor, would have excited the most furious resentment, and, possibly, have exposed their lives to danger. In similar circumstances, as, at Naples, on the celebrated feast of St. Januarius, the wild rage of an Italian rabble has been often witnessed. But the report of the painters is not consistent, as given by the French Canon. Their amazement,

* J'ai été convaincu, mais sur la foi d'autrui, p. 6.

he says, was, when in moving their hands over the face, to convince themselves there was no *elevation**, the eyes opened, as the hands had passed; whereas one of these men, aware, from further reflection, as it must seem, that, if he added the testimony of the touch, it would mightily encrease that of the eyes, afterwards assured him, "that what struck him most, was to feel the eyes move under his fingers." It will be the opinion, I apprehend, of many, to whatever sense these painters may have recourse, that they were paid for their testimony. This, in the calculation of probabilities, must, I own, be admitted as more likely, than that the eyes of a picture really moved.

The prodigies of Rome examined.

The prodigies of Rome, as far as the motion of the eyes goes, coincide so minutely with those of Ancona, and the circumstances of terror, on the minds of the people, from an apprehended conspiracy, from the success of the French arms, and from other concomitant causes, are so similar, that I shall be dispensed from much discussion, which would be a repetition of the same ideas. How natural was it, when our lady of Ancona had moved her eyes, that some lady of the Roman capital should follow the example. But strange it is, though it evinces the blinding power of enthusiasm, that neither the circumstance of *imitation* between the picture of Ancona and that del'Archetto

* The word *elevation*, the ingenious English Editors translate *hollow*.

which took the lead in Rome, nor the cry of the people before a second picture, "Most holy Virgin, favour *us* with a miracle," nor the immediate effect, nor the series of similar events, which so rapidly succeeded in other parts of the city, should, at the same time, have *opened the eyes*, even of superficial men, to trace the cause, and the obvious progress of the illusion. Had I wished for the most palpable example, whereby to illustrate any problems of sensitive deceptions, nothing could have been offered more convincing than this.

And the testimonies of the witnesses are of the same complexion; only, from some of them it transpires, that the enthusiasm, that is, the belief in the prodigies was not so general, and the appearance of these prodigies not so incessant, as the writers of the letters seem disposed to report. The Theologian *Bonomi*, (p. 19.) after the wonders had been exhibited for eight days, writes, "That he was not himself an eye-witness, because his sight was imperfect (so was that of the Canon of Lyons), because he *happened not* to be present in any of those happy moments, when such things were seen, and because *he had not time to stay long enough to see them.*" What indifference! yet he had published, it seems, "a work of Criticism on Miracles," which should have warmed his curiosity; and had his zeal been alive, he might easily have been favoured, for in another letter we are assured, (p. 17.) "That prodigies appeared as often as

fervent prayers were offered," and "That a miracle never failed when the Virgin was approached with a lively faith." The remark of Bonomi, which he gives as profound, that the prodigies chiefly attached themselves to "neglected pictures," is of no weight, as that of Ancona was "miraculous," and that del'Archetto was avowedly celebrated; but it may prove, that the superstition of the people, after their minds were warmed, fastened on the first pictures they beheld in the streets.—The authors of another letter (p. 23.) though sufficiently believing, declare "That themselves had not seen the prodigies, because they were not at the places where and times when they were wrought."—And the phlegmatic Robert Smelt (p. 31.) thus speaks: "I saw one picture close its eyes, at least I thought so."

But what must we think of the apathy of his Holiness, who, while these prodigies are exhibited, the first report of which, we are told, caused his ancient blood to flow with the full pulse of youth, sits composed in his palace, and only thence feeds the public enthusiasm, by directing sermons to be preached, and processions to be performed. In this he acts with wisdom, still encouraging a belief that tends to animate the people, availing himself of their convictions, to draw them on to a reform of life and to the practice of religious duties, but withholding his own presence from the scene of prodigies, that the weakness of belief, which that

presence would attest, might not be imputed to the first pastor, when the fallacy of those prodigies should hereafter be detected. *Si populus vult decipi, decipiatur* *, has been the maxim of many politic rulers, who knew how to convert the sottishness of the multitude into a commodious engine of government. I impute no unworthy views to Pius VI. but, certainly, he is not obliged to believe what he has not seen, or to see what he is not willing to behold; and if, while his subjects are deranged, he makes use of their folly to effect their greater good, he must be absolved in the severest school of moral casuistry, while that of political prudence will applaud him.

On the story of the lilies, the subject of which is profane, and which forms an episode in the general drama, I might be allowed to be less serious, were I so disposed. The French letter-writers (p. 24.) speaking of them, suggest an unexpected reflection: "One thing," say they, "we ourselves have seen, which some are willing to think a natural process of vegetation, but which to us and others seems something wonderful†." I would ask, if, as these gentlemen represent it, green buds suddenly appeared on dry and withered stalks, which had been suspended for years, and the stalks themselves became green, how any man, however sceptical, could ascribe the effect to a vegetating

The story of
the lilies.

* If the people chuse to be deceived, be it so.

† *Surprenant* is translated *surprernatural* agency.

process? But some persons it seems did; the obvious inference from which is, that the fact was variously represented, and that there was nothing in it which should have excited wonder. They add, that at the date of their letter, the 22d of July, the lilies were returned to their former state of ficcinity *. The whole, probably, was the trick of some ingenious artist, amusing himself with the credulity of his fellow-citizens. This supposition, or any other which botanical science could suggest, must be rather admitted, than that “supernatural agency, for such unworthy and unmeaning purposes, should be introduced.”

On the other prodigies in Rome and elsewhere I have nothing to add. Cures are reported to have been performed, as, in some cases it may have happened: but, I am sure, no blind saw, no dumb really spoke; and if any lame walked, their crutches had been assumed for very obvious ends.—On the last lilies, however, and on three others, which, with an illuminated cross, appeared over Loretto, I will further remark, that there seems in them some allusion to be made to the late arms of France, with the circumstances of which country, in the progress of their arms, the whole series of the prodigies is manifestly connected.

The object
of the pro-
digies unde-
fined.

I appear, in the contemplation of these events, to have been drawn out from my own span of existence, and carried back into those ages of bar-

* This circumstance the translators totally omit.

barism, when the darkest ignorance prevailed, and prodigies, every moment, were engendered in the gloom. But, in truth, among these prodigies, few, I think, will be found less deserving of belief, than what Italy has now exhibited. And to what do they lead the mind? Aware of this, and that their object was undefined, for the arms of Buonaparte triumphed, and Italy lay prostrate at his feet, the letter-writers turn to another consideration, widely different, I am confident, from that which first warmed their attention. They state, that, as the effects produced on the public were “ a sincere repentance, the reconciliation of enemies, bad habits broken,” in a word, a total change of manners, these may be viewed as an unequivocal proof of a supernatural interposition. The inference is not just. Let it only be supposed, which no one will deny, that the people *thought* they saw prodigies, and that thought created *enthusiasm*, all the moral effects, on which these writers dwell, would as assuredly follow, as if Heaven had distinctly spoken. Imaginary terror is as real in its effects, as the awful impressions of the most substantial causes. I shall be told of the co-operation of divine grace and other heavenly aids, which now conspire to carry on the work of reformation in Italy, and which would not be granted in cases of illusion. Let this be proved. I may, moreover, add, that, in the government of the moral world, Providence is not known to interpose miraculously,

where, as among a christian people, all the ordinary means have been provided for instruction, exhortation, and the application of other spiritual helps. In what were the Romans so gone astray, that Heaven must come down to address them in signs, so whimsical and indefinite? One writer indeed says: "It seems that the Deity is thereby disposed to cause religion to flourish, and to reform morality, both of which were nearly extinct*." Let this have been the case, and prodigies as necessary to rouse the Italians, as formerly they were to the Jews, who will persuade me, that the great work would have been attempted, by pictures moving their eyes or the budding of withered lilies? This leads me to an important consideration, to which I have already alluded, that is, the direct tendency of these supposed miracles to strengthen a superstition, already widely spread through the churches of Italy, and which tendency alone, without the aid of other arguments, would overthrow, in the mind of every rational Christian, the whole fabric of these prodigies.

Their tendency pernicious.

I quote not the authority of travellers, who too often see with prejudice, but I quote the learned and temperate Muratori, who, in a sterling work, intitled, *Della Regolata Divozione*, points to various abuses in the popular veneration of the images of

* The cautious English Editors have not dared to translate this passage (p. 16.) which, however, was originally written by a priest of the Roman Congregation of Rites. See p. 18.

the Virgin and of favourite Saints: So late as the year 1787, while Leopold was projecting a general reform in the States of Tuscany, the Bishops of the dukedom assembled, by his order, at Florence, where, among other important matters, they discussed the abuses of image-worship, the existence of which was denied by none, and projected means for their suppression. The heads of their debates, which are highly interesting, have been published in a work, entitled, *Istoria dell' Assemblée di Toscana*. But the efforts of these enlightened men did not completely succeed. They were opposed by a party, interested in the perpetuation of abuses, who excited the people to rise in defence of their favourite relics and pictures, and to threaten the most furious opposition.

But the history alone of the late events sufficiently evinces the prevalence of the evil. The women of Ancona were "particularly devout to a miraculous picture," and when danger seemed to threaten them, to it they had recourse for protection. In the streets of Rome other persons, probably women, were heard to exclaim before a picture, "Holy Virgin, favour *us* with a miracle." I am aware, it will be said, that it was not to the image they addressed themselves, but to the Holy Virgin it represented, from whose *intercession* with their Heavenly Father they alone looked for succour. It is a vain subterfuge. With instructed minds it would be so; but not with the populace

in the streets of Rome or in the cathedral of Ancona, who, there is reason to fear, raised their eyes to their images with a veneration as superstitious, as did the Ephesians to the statues of their Diana. The complaints of the Tuscan Bishops in the meeting at Florence authorise me to say as much, and in the ecclesiastical states the abuse is known to be more inveterate. At all events, not to cavil on the *quantum* of the evil, its notoriety to a great extent is universally acknowledged.

Now let me ask : Could any events more directly tend to confirm the wrong conceptions of the Italian populace, in regard to their images, and to extend the abuse, than the supposed prodigies in question ? Had all before been rational and temperate, these might have endangered the soberness of devotion, and exposed the mind to error. A miraculous *picture* moves its eyes ; other *pictures* of the Virgin follow the example ; withered lilies placed near a *picture* push forth buds ; in other towns other *pictures* shew similar signs ! These are the master events ; others are but subordinate and secondary, though the latter are connected with the first. If the blind, the dumb, the lame are restored to sanity, it is in reference to the *pictures* : if penitential works are performed, and Rome, as is represented, becomes a Niniveh, the moving eyes of the *pictures* are the cause. In cool expostulation let me ask : Must not the misconceptions of the ignorant be thus strengthened ? Must they not conclude, that all

their former notions about images and their miraculous powers were consistent with the genuine tenets of Christian Faith, when Heaven had thus deigned, by such apposite prodigies, to listen to their supplications? So it must be. It is not possible to evade the evidence of this inference.

I now look for a man, who will be hardy enough to maintain, that the Deity can patronise superstition!—This argument alone weighs so much on my mind, that, had I been at Ancona or at Rome, when the reported prodigies were performed, and all my senses with the clearest evidence, had attested their reality, I must have rejected it,—or have subscribed to a blasphemy.

Are these witnesses ignorant of a great occasion, when, by the tenets of their faith, they profess not to believe the testimony of their senses? They do it, they say, on the superior authority of the words of Christ. On a similar authority, that the God of truth cannot teach, nor abet, error, I reject the prodigies of Italy.—It is time to conclude.

Already, probably, the illusion is passed; for, Conclusion.
on the 16th of July, (p. 17.) one of the witnesses thus writes: “ My friends, this epoch will be ever memorable. Of such a multiplicity of prodigies we have no example: their frequency is such, that the motion of the eyes of the Virgin’s pictures has almost ceased *to make any impression* on the be-

holders *." Had the Divine Being then, in so few days, exhausted the admiration of the Roman people? The irritability of the Englishman, Stephen Green (p. 22.) is much more constant. The sight of the motion of the eyes "made his hair," he says, "stand almost upright;" and whilst he wrote on the 19th, it was still, he assures us, in the same state of horror. Devout persons were not quite satisfied: they presaged something more: "Many holy persons in this city," say the writers, (p. 15.) "assert that all these prodigies are the forerunners of a more astonishing miracle which will soon happen, and which will fill us with consolation." What this was to be, or whether it has happened, we know not; but we know that, at this precise period, great success was expected from the arms of Wurmser.

To paroxysms of enthusiasm the Italians are particularly subject, though, in few countries, there is reason to think, is infidelity more prevalent. But this is no security against its influence: Muratori at least, asserts, that notorious sinners and highway assassins have been seen "to light up tapers before some holy image, or to carry about them the relics of Saints."

About twelve years ago, Rome and other parts of Europe resounded with the report of miracles, wrought by a celebrated beggar, who, at that time,

* This passage is unfaithfully translated by the Editors. "To create any extraordinary sensation," is their free rendering.

died, named Labre. I remember to have read their history, which was circulated with much ardour : but the Jesuits, with or without reason, suspecting the holy man of Jansenism, decried his miracles, and raised another Thaumaturgus of their own society, who then opportunely died at Toulouse, to oppose the current of his fame. So is mankind duped. The prodigies wrought by both the Saints, as the novelty ceased, died away ; and I have been told, that a late papal envoy to this country, if he be not still here, was greatly instrumental in proving, during the process of the canonization of Labre, that “ so far from working miracles and being a Saint, he was hardly a Catholic.”

What were the miracles of the Deacon Paris, the renowned saint of the Jansenistic Faction, so strongly attested by innumerable witnesses, about the beginning of this century, and what the disturbances raised in France on the occasion, may be seen in all the histories of the times. If the testimonies of eye-witnesses could realise such prodigies, the miracles of that Deacon must not be controverted. But they are rejected by the orthodox. Men, then, it seems, may see, and be convinced by their senses, and yet be deceived.

The arguments, which I have urged, will have no effect on men, such as seem to be the English Editors of the letters, who are predisposed to believe in prodigies, and for whose credulity no tale can be too improbable. Nor shall I find credit

with those, who weakly think, that no untruth can come from Rome, or that men of probity could be so far imposed on, as solemnly to give their assent to an illusion. Others feel a secret pleasure in feeding their minds with marvellous events, who will not thank me for attempting to abridge their enjoyments. But I shall be listened to, I think, by those who seriously seek for information, who detest every species of imposition, particularly in the concerns of religion ; but who, from situation in life, or from other causes, may not have been habituated to such critical enquiries, as are necessary for the detection of error. For these I write. I write to convince our Protestant brethren, that Catholics are as free as they in the discussion of all points, where it is not evident, from the fountains of divine inspiration, that God has spoken. I write to obviate the aspersions, which our faith, when these tales shall have been sufficiently circulated, must inevitably experience. I write, finally, to check, if it may be, the attempts of men, who, it is plain, are labouring to impress on the minds of English Catholics a belief in prodigies, and to disfigure their religion with the abuses of image-worship, from which, fortunately, it has been freed.

We have had men among us, and still have them, who fancy that the integrity, if not the existence, of their religion is connected with the perpetuity of miracles. Hence they catch at every

supposed prodigy, and strive to give it consistency, that no link may be wanting in their chain of evidence. This, in part, it is, that has filled the legends of Saints with the wildest tales, and nourished in the minds of their readers a pitiable credulity. Fortunately, the defenders of the great cause of our common christianity have, long ago, surrendered this point, and rested their apologies, if so they may be called, on a surer basis. It gives a solemn dignity and an encreased power of conviction to the miracles of primitive times, that they should not be mixed with suspicious events or the base alloy of counterfeit materials. With what the Deity has done for his own work, in the foundation of Christianity, let us be satisfied: the rock is secure: it wants no aid from the resources of human contrivance, much less such flimsy support, which defeats its own purpose, that Ancona and Rome, in their imaginary prodigies of "moving eyes and budding lilies," are pleased to offer.

Buckland, October 13, 1796

THE END.

ADVERTISEMENT.

ON this occasion, I take the liberty to inform those, who, sometimes, enquire about the progress of my *History of the Rise, the Progress, and the Decline of the Papal Power*, that I am advanced to the close of the IXth century; that the materials, I have collected, which are ready for the press, will form more than two volumes in 4to; that the whole, when completed, will extend to, at least, five volumes; that, possibly, in the course of the ensuing year, should the times prove favourable, I shall publish a first volume.

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